

# Introduction

The title of this book, *Encountering Jesus in Word, Sacraments, and Works of Charity*, draws its inspiration from various talks of Benedict XVI. The clear, overarching, and consistent approach of Benedict XVI in his teaching and the direction of his theological vision is an “encounter” with Christ, with God. It is his fundamental way of approaching our relationship with God. In fact, while on the airplane on his way to Germany for his state visit, he said, “Therefore I know that . . . a great many people are waiting for me joyfully, waiting for a celebration of faith, a being together, and they look forward to the joy of *encountering God*.”<sup>1</sup>

In the very first paragraph of his first encyclical letter, *Deus Caritas Est (God Is Love)*, Benedict XVI wrote:

Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, *but the encounter with an event, a person*, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. . . . Since God has first loved us . . . love is now no longer a mere “command”; it is the response to the gift of love with which God draws near to us. (*DCE 1*; emphasis added)

And that “encounter” of love is with Jesus. That is the basis of our friendship with him as a follower of Jesus. It is a personal relationship and an encounter.

In a beautiful homily given at Regensburg, Germany, in 2006, Benedict XVI spoke of the Apostles’ Creed: “The Creed is not a collection of propositions; it is not a theory. It is anchored in the event of Baptism—a genuine encounter between God and man.” For him, the Creed is thus primarily an encounter with Christ and not just a way of expressing the contents of our faith.

In one of his first homilies after his election, as if to set the tone for his papacy, Benedict XVI said, “There is nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the Gospel, by the encounter with Christ. There is nothing more beautiful than to know Him and to speak to others of our friendship with Him” (April 24, 2005).

Already, in the early days of Pope Francis, this theme of an encounter with Jesus Christ seems to continue:

Inspired also by the celebration of the Year of Faith, all of us together, pastors and members of the faithful, will strive to respond faithfully to the Church’s perennial mission: to bring Jesus Christ to mankind and to lead mankind *to an encounter with Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, truly present in the Church and also in every person*. This meeting leads us to become new men in the mystery of Grace, kindling in the spirit that Christian joy that is the hundredfold given by Christ to those who welcome him into

their lives. (Address to the College of Cardinals, March 15, 2013; emphasis added)

This book focuses on the three ways to encounter Jesus: in the Word of God, in the sacraments, and in the witness of charity. In *Deus Caritas Est*, Benedict XVI wrote:

The Church's deepest nature is expressed in her three-fold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God (*kerygma-martyria*), celebrating the sacraments (*leitourgia*), and exercising the ministry of charity (*diakonia*). These duties presuppose each other and are inseparable. (DCE 25)

He stated further, "The Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word" (DCE 22). As the Church is the Body of Christ, the Word, sacraments, and works of charity express the deepest nature of the Church. It is in these three ways that we encounter Jesus in our time.



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Part I:  
Encountering Jesus  
in His Word

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## ONE

### **The Making of an Evangelizer**

**I**n *Verbum Domini* (Word of the Lord), his 2010 Apostolic Exhortation following the Synod on the Word of God, Benedict XVI wrote, “The Christian life is essentially marked by an encounter with Jesus Christ, who calls us to follow him” (VD 72). The first way that we can encounter Jesus is through his Word. It is there that we come to meet and know and be affected by him through our meditative and prayerful appropriation of his holy Word.

In these days and at this time in history, I would suggest that our Church and our world are eagerly awaiting a new encounter with Jesus. Let us look to Peter and his encounter with Jesus. He is a model for you and me on what it means to be an evangelizer for Christ. This is especially true as our Church—at all levels—is becoming committed to a New Evangelization, which challenges each of us to become more faithful and faith-filled evangelizers.

The New Evangelization is the challenge to repropose in new ways the ancient verities of our faith to members of our families, coworkers, fallen-away Catholics, and whomever the Lord puts in our way. The archbishop of Washington, Cardinal Donald Wuerl,

perceptively described the cultural climate of evangelization to the 2012 Synod of Bishops, whose theme was “The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith.” Speaking of our time, he stated, “It is as if a tsunami of secular influence has swept across the cultural landscape, taking with it such societal markers as marriage, family, the concept of the common good and objective right and wrong.”<sup>2</sup> Such is the present climate for the New Evangelization.

Peter’s encounter with Jesus is informative as we consider the challenges of the New Evangelization. I invite you to reflect with me on Luke 5:1–11, the call of Peter, the fisherman. It is a well-known passage. Put yourself in the passage as you read.

While the crowd was pressing in on Jesus and listening to the word of God, he was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret. He saw two boats there alongside the lake; the fishermen had disembarked and were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, he asked him to put out a short distance from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. After he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch.” Simon said in reply, “Master, we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing, but at your command I will lower the nets.” When they had done this, they caught a great number of fish and their nets were tearing. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come to help them. They came



and filled both boats so that they were in danger of sinking. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at the knees of Jesus and said, “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” For astonishment at the catch of fish they had made seized him and all those with him, and likewise James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were partners of Simon. Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.” When they brought their boats to the shore, they left everything and followed him. (Lk 5:1–11)

This is a most revealing story, not only about the initial difficulties at catching fish and a sudden turn for the better, but also about Jesus’ preaching the Word of God and his preparing Peter and the others to do the same thing—to be evangelizers. The story is full of details and carefully chosen words—a gospel passage from St. Luke that also speaks directly to you and me.

We read that the crowd was “pressing in on Jesus and listening to the word of God.” In effect, they encountered him precisely in their listening to the Word of God for he is the Word of God enfleshed. In listening to his Word, they encountered him—as do we.

In addition, each of us can certainly identify with Jesus, who must have been so very tired—for the crowds had been pressing against him all day as he preached the Word of God. We know that feeling! At the end of a long day filled with appointments, phone calls, e-mails, and text messages, sometimes

we would just like to disappear from the world. But we know we cannot.

Jesus probably felt the same and wanted to disappear. Instead he got into Peter's boat and asked him to pull out a short way, where Jesus continued to teach the crowds. This time, however, Jesus did it sitting down. Peter encountered him more closely. It shows that Jesus wanted to be with Peter, as he wants to be with us, more closely in the specific, concrete times of our lives.

He chose Peter's boat out of all the boats. Peter must have felt so proud that the Lord had singled him out. Yet Peter certainly could not have had any idea what was in store for him. He could not have known why it was that Jesus had picked his boat and why it was that Jesus, after he had finished speaking, asked Peter to pull out into deep water and lower his net.

In reflecting on this passage, I invite you to focus on two aspects of the text, two aspects that help explain its underlying meaning.

First, consider Peter's response to Jesus: "Master, we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing." The words "worked hard" are used in other places in the New Testament typically to mean "apostolic toil." In other words, we have put in a lot of work, expended much energy, exhausted ourselves, and nothing has come of it. There is a sense of weariness in Peter's choice of words, a certain defeatism and lack of confidence. "Lord, you could have helped us from the beginning, why did you not?"

It was Peter's turn to make a choice. He could have given in to his weariness, telling Jesus that he had already tried. He could have said it is no use or it is better to go home. In effect, he could have simply rejected Jesus' request. That can happen to us when Jesus asks us to make certain decisions in life. We reject his Word and follow our own instincts. But not Peter!

He decided to obey the Word of Jesus. He consciously decided to take a chance, put out into the deep, and lower the nets—to run a small risk, to ignore his overwhelming fatigue and the threat of ridicule among his coworkers and friends.

In effect, he listened to and obeyed the Word of God, the Word of Jesus. Moreover, he trusted in the Word of Jesus. After all, it is precisely the work of Jesus and not primarily our own work. And in the process, he became a changed man.

By his command to put out into the deep, Jesus was forming him to be not only an apostle, an evangelizer, but eventually the leader of the apostles. For sure, we know so well from scripture that Peter would continue to vacillate and even deny Jesus in the garden. He did it not once but three times. But in this text, Jesus was helping Peter to see that obeying and trusting the Word of God can lead to an incredible success. The men caught such a great number of fish that their nets were at the breaking point.

The true evangelizer stands challenged at such moments, whether it is a question of taking a little risk (or even a large risk), throwing himself into something, or not stopping to calculate or weigh things too much.